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Ethnography of Virtual Phenomena and Processes on the Internet

Abstract

The paper presents the ethnography of virtual phenomena and processes, conducted in the social, educational and cultural spheres of the Internet. It describes the most important features of the global network and shows all its aspects which are the subject of ethnographic studies at the Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology of the University of Silesia in Katowice, i.e. the communication process and its semiotic character, the process of creating social networks, education supported by social media, virtual self-help groups for stigmatised people, and cyberbullying.

Keywords: *virtual ethnography, global network, communication process, social networks, distance learning, virtual support groups, cyberbullying*

1. Ethnography of Virtual Space

First, we should try to define the term: ethnography of virtual space (in English a more concise term is used: *virtual ethnography* or *digital ethnography* – Boellstorff T., 2008) or nethnography (Kozinets R. V, 2002, pp. 449–467).

Virtual ethnography is defined as studying and describing (characterising) people and phenomena on the basis of users' behaviour and its consequences, which can be observed on the Internet. Field research is conducted in the existing Internet environment in real time (i.e. on-line), while a researcher operates on the same terms as other network users, which means, e.g., that he is a legitimate user of forums, not a guest. Thus, virtual ethnography is not research which only exploits the Internet as a platform for communication purposes, such as conducting group

or individual interviews on-line. The Internet is regarded as a communication environment, social network, educational and scientific space or a space for leisure activities such as playing computer games with other users. This environment is created by a certain number of users who join it by means of various ICT tools (as described by the theory of connectivism – G. Siemens, 2005, pp. 3–10).

Internet research involves locating the subject of the studies as well as the scope/area of quality discussion and reasoning. Therefore, we can conduct research in which: (a) the Internet is the only research area, (b) the Internet becomes a research tool only or (c) research with the help of networks which refer to the phenomena occurring in different proportions both off-line and on-line (where the on-user is an active user and the off-user is an absent user). In the first case, the research subject and the reasoning refer directly to the network, which means that when we analyse the on-line activity of users we relate our judgements to this virtual space. In the research process we place the language used for communication on forums or via messengers, anonymous communities or discussion groups, and analyse the use of signs and icons like emoticons and graphics (A. Brosch, 2008, pp. 91–101), or web nicks (after logging in/signing in on a forum, the user chooses a nick instead of a name and selects his avatar as a symbol/representation of his body). What we are interested in is the course of the phenomena and processes, not their etiology. We do not delve into the users' motivation, nor do we comment on the off-line reality, i.e. on who the users really are and what their physical and social worlds look like, etc. According to Piotr Cichocki, Tomasz Jędrkiewicz and Robert Zydel (2012, p. 207) this kind of research is often applied to the analysis of anonymous communication platforms and it is conducive to the development of e-business.

Studies in which the Internet was treated as a research tool were often used for conducting market research. As part of the studies, information published on the Internet (e.g. on blogs or forums, i.e. posts¹) was read. On this basis, it was possible to draw conclusions about the users' behaviour, actions, opinions, and hence about their attitudes demonstrated outside the Internet, i.e. in objective reality. However, researchers often treated this information literally and uncritically. They neither used verification techniques according to the triangulation principle nor took the specificity of this global medium into consideration. Still, it is possible to find some examples of empirical research where the Internet as a tool was used in studies with a high cognitive value, provided that the examined texts are not treated as

¹ A post is an informative text which can be created by a user at any time, it can take as long as one wishes, its content can be modified and corrected multiple times in order to make it well-thought-out, more logical and intelligible; it can include emoticons that reflect emotions, moods and feelings.

a literal reflection of objective reality. An example of the analysis of mothers' blogs can be mentioned here. These blogs were used to examine values, motivation and aspiration (M. Olcoń-Kubicka, 2006, pp. 267–282). Research via the Internet has become a good analysis tool in visual anthropology (c.f. M. Banks, 2007). Users of forums often publish a huge number of photographs and videos on the Internet. These materials are self-censored to a lesser extent than the published texts (posts). Moreover, the process of their creation is more spontaneous than editing texts. Thus, an attentive researcher is able to gain a lot of valuable information about the author of the material, where and why it was published and what it contains.

The third type of the Internet research regarding phenomena which occur in different off-line and on-line proportions, aims at creating and keeping Internet identities (S. Wilson, L. Petersen, 2002, pp. 449–467), communicating individually or within groups, establishing and maintaining new Internet relationships (sometimes such relationships are transferred to objective reality), and engaging in e-trade or e-services which combine real and virtual aspects (P. Cichocki, T. Jędrkiewicz, R. Zydel, 2012). Virtual ethnography is sometimes not sufficient enough to create an image of an off-line phenomenon being explored. Therefore, a researcher goes back to the classic ethnographic observations or some in-depth interviews, looks for information to explore the historic and social context of the phenomenon and even searches for quantitative data or descriptions of users' behaviour. (cf., M. Agrosino, 2007). More and more often objective reality and *alter* reality are mixing together. This is due to the fact that social, educational, and economic processes more and more frequently take place in the network. Web-based communities also contribute to that by successful reconfiguration of social relationships in objective reality and the way they are perceived by the users (D. Miller, 2011).

Researchers often reflect on the quality of the studies in virtual ethnography. Similarly as in the case of other quantitative research, including classical ethnography, which uses participant observation, in-depth interviews or focus groups, there is no generalisation of the research results to the general population. These are still studies which are conducted here and now. We can have some basic objections about the completeness of the analysed information and its accuracy. Thus, the study group should be carefully defined. It is particularly difficult to characterise the youth, who often leave no clear signs of navigating the Internet (McMillan S., Morrison M., 2000, pp. 73–95). Young people rarely write posts on forums or publish photographs. They are guests who just observe other people's activity. As more complete characteristics can be constructed only for the active user, the results of our studies mostly concern active users. The availability and completeness of information, its content and accuracy are also important. Therefore, the Internet

researcher should be highly skilled in navigating the Internet, obtaining access to websites which are password-protected and even striking up new friendships with Internet users. He should follow the posts of such friends on various forums, chats and social networks, determine the intentions, meaning and sense of their posts, observe their relations with other users and the time and frequency of contacts between them, look for internal inconsistencies and signs of manipulation, and ask other users for opinions. An Internet researcher should also be critical of the content and images published by the users who want to be seen by the community as people who are perfect, rich and successful, who travel around the world, have fascinating hobbies and happy families, etc. (P. Cichocki, T. Jędrkiewicz, R. Zydel, 2012, p. 208). It may be concluded that a cyberspace researcher encounters more difficulties and traps than a researcher exploring objective reality directly, often face to face.

2. Subjects of Internet Studies

The analysis of the literature on the subject indicates that virtual ethnography is used mainly for studying users' identities, their communities and interpersonal relations which are created in the course of the communication process, distance learning with the use of social media (S. Juszczuk, 2013a, pp. 9–22; S. Juszczuk, 2003, pp. 159–178; T. Huk, 2009, pp. 58–77), activity on dating sites, joint participation in computer games (S. Juszczuk, 2010, pp. 47–51), and even the creation of the community of hackers. The subjects of the research are ethnic, religious or class groups which demonstrate their specific identity on the Internet (D. Miller, D. Slater, 2000). What is also examined is the phenomenon of users' participation, for instance, the youth, in culture (M. Filiciak et al., 2010), e-business and e-business strategic planning, market offers, marketing communication and marketing activities or monitoring the main channels of communication between customers (P. Cichocki, T. Jędrkiewicz, R. Zydel, 2012, p. 209) as well as analysing the Internet culture which reflects the culture of its founders (S. Juszczuk, 2009, pp. 15–27). What can also be found by an attentive researcher are: exemplifications of cyberbullying, presentations of various subcultures, religious groups, militarists, mafias, paedophiles and a lot of other information posted by various groups and organisations.

Let us analyse some aspects of the global network which is particularly studied by means of virtual ethnography at the Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology of the Silesian University in Katowice.

2.1. Communication on the Internet

The spread of the Internet contributed greatly to the emergence of a new type of communication, which resulted in the development of a new kind of human relations consisting in interactive contacts. The contacts on the web differ significantly from a typical conversation. They are not determined by the appearance and social status of the participants, which can considerably influence the way of perceiving others. The Internet offers great possibilities of cheap, global and rapid communication. It has blurred the differences between what is global and what is local and, most importantly, has introduced new communication and interactive channels (A. Giddens, 2004, p. 495).

Modern communication is characterised by ambiguity resulting from the intention of the sender, interference of the communication channel and, finally, from the receiver's competence. A typical pattern of communication was a message coming from a sender, going through numerous intermediate stages (e.g., through a channel, context, code, etc.), and finally getting to a receiver. However, in the modern media messages the sender is not so visible anymore and the new active and creative roles are taken over by the receiver (T. Miczka, 2002, pp. 10–11). It is just for the receiver that the messages are created intentionally. It is for the receiver that various mass media workers analyse some important events, try to be in many different places, foresee some events and comment on them to provide the receivers with already interpreted information. What dominates is the so-called “news”, which has become the subject of journalists' work.

Communication via the Internet takes place primarily through the text channel (A. Brosch, 2007) and thus the written language remains the fundamental way of communication between net surfers. This leads to substantial semiotic changes (P. Sitarski, 2001, pp. 177–182). In the process of indirect communication some instant messengers, such as Gadu Gadu and Skype and the so-called chat rooms, are commonly used. Social media are becoming forums for the general exchange of views, opinions and preferences. Among them there are ones which lead to the creation of social networking (e.g. Facebook) and making the users' opinions and beliefs public (e.g., Blogger or Twitter). There are also multimedia websites created for other users to allow them to gather and share resources (e.g., YouTube) (S. Juszczuk, 2013a).

2.2. Semiotic Character of Online Interaction

Modern communication displays its dominant semiotic dimension because it would not be possible to convey the meaning without the existence of signs. The essence and the sense of communication is, after all, the transmission of

certain content by means of a code which is familiar to all people involved in communication.

Therefore, a sign, symbol, or icon have become characteristic features of online communication. This allows the interacting people to communicate without any words or, at least, without their excessive use. The iconisation of the communication process is not dictated by economy because an icon takes up more space on a data storage medium than a single word. It is rather caused by the convenience of the user. Interface based on an image is much friendlier, more comprehensible and easier to be acquired by the user. The culture of modern communication seems to have been transforming into the culture of image for about twenty years now. Signs, symbols or icons are frequently used by children and young people in indirect communication on the Internet (S. Juszczuk, 2009, 2011, 2012) and though mobile phones (T. Huk, 2012).

Many elements which function on the websites are depicted in such a way as to be able to communicate with a potential user without excessive use of words. It sometimes leads to the complete elimination of a text in favour of an image. While analysing the content of media messages, we can observe that the image prevails over the text, sometimes even superseding it. The electronic word assumes an auxiliary role in relation to the image, and the multimedia form itself makes us focus our attention on the image rather than on the text (A. Surdyk, 2007).

Given the transformations that take place in the language among Internet users (e.g., moving away from linearity, cause and effect relationships, and classical norms of correctness, lack of a well-thought-out message from an author, ellipticity of the messages, combining verbal and iconic codes, combining speech and writing, introducing a number of stylistic and lexical innovations) it is possible to conclude that communication acquires some features that are typical of intertextual computer games. Thus, there is a need to develop a new methodology of research on mediatisation of communication areas because the “linguistic methodology” cannot be a hermetic model (J. Grzenia, 2006) and that is why interdisciplinarity and far-reaching “poly-methodology” should be incorporated. The researchers of multimedia claim that databases and hypertexts are the new cultural forms which affect interdisciplinarity to the greatest extent, directing it towards science which is understood as repetitive hybrid type free flows of knowledge. (L. Manovich, 2006, p. 320).

A separate part of our analysis should be devoted to photographs, videos, pictures and images placed by the users on community portals, such as Nasza Klasa or Facebook.

2.3. Process of Learning with the Use of Social Media

Social media (e.g., Facebook, Blogger, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, SecondLife, and the like) as well as the places where they function are more complex in terms of the code, icon, symbol, construction and function. Social media also refer to the contemporary models of economic and social systems. They can be described as comprising all web-based and mobile networks which offer free access with interactive connection. The unrestricted access (the above-mentioned connectivity) allows a single user to browse, comment on and modernise the content for other users in different parts of the network and communicate with other users about this medium or the presented content. Those media can be effectively used in the process of learning, which is analysed by the theory of connectivism (S. Juszczuk, 2013a). According to F. Bell (2011), a dynamic context of learning in the network environment is the reason why, at the current stage of empirical studies and theoretical analyses, the theory of connectivism is not broad enough to describe all the aspects of the web-supported learning process. However, connectivism is an influential phenomenon that inspires teachers and learners to introduce changes to their educational activities and motivates them to new reflections.

2.4. Virtual Self-Help Groups on the Internet

In the postmodern society, where everyone has the right to diversity (cultural, national, ethnic, linguistic, sexual orientation diversity, diversity in the perception of natural environment, etc.), equality and responsibility for their own lives and choices, stigmatisation is not treated well. There are groups of people in our culture which are stigmatised to a lesser or greater degree. These groups include: the disabled, the terminally and chronically ill (often their families, too), people with unsightly appearance, the homeless, the unemployed, single mothers, children from orphanages, addicts, the elderly, national, ethnic, racial and sexual minorities (homosexuals and transsexuals), people of some professions (e.g., executioners, undertakers, people working in mortuaries, gynaecologists who carry out abortions, prostitutes), the mentally ill or psychiatrically treated, convicts, obese or anorexic, dwarfs and very tall people, people with forenames and/or surnames which are ridiculed and many more. (cf., E. Gofmann 2005; E. Czywkin, 2007).

Social media, such as discussion forums, blogs, twitters and instant messengers, which are increasingly common on the Internet provide large-scale virtual self-help, which is universal, barrier-free and conducive to positive emotional states. Among virtual self-help groups there are people who are going or have gone through the same experience. This similarity of experience, history and development of problems greatly facilitates the contact, communication and, what is very important for

the stigmatised people, provides informational, emotional, instrumental and even financial support. Therefore, the current phenomenon of such self-help groups on the Internet, where the affected participants meet in cyberspace, exchange their views and opinions and have the chance to pursue common objectives, is worth exploring. The Internet information space is shared by many users and is readily available to the people concerned. It is also a place of virtual meetings, which contributes to the creation of social bonds and provision of mutual assistance as well as evokes a sense of belonging (M. Szpunar, 2004). The principle of reciprocity has become a moral standard among Internet users, an unwritten rule which obliges the individual to act in favour of the stigmatised people, including also those with disabilities. (S. Juszczuk, 2013b, pp. 285–298).

2.5. Cyberbullying among Children and Young People

Civilisation changes exert an impact on various social problems and thus also on the pedagogical ones. The problem of peer bullying among students is subject to the processes of development as well, because new reasons and circumstances which underlie the behaviour of young people keep emerging. They result from social and cultural phenomena, which are also constantly changing. What is more, the technological progress and opportunities created by the new media also contribute to the development of undesirable social behaviour. There is no doubt that the phenomenon of bullying, with the use of new media and ICT tools (especially the Internet and mobile phones) among children and young people is becoming an increasingly important problem for education, upbringing and social prevention. Research conducted by A. Waligóra-Huk (2012) analyses, e.g., the phenomenon of cyberbullying among young people attending rural schools, particularly in terms of its characteristic features, causes, most common forms and frequency of bullying with the use of new media, the awareness of this problem among children, young people and their parents, as well as appropriate actions undertaken by schools, parents, local communities, local governments and non-government organisations to prevent cyberbullying.

Conclusions

The global network is expanding in a turbulent and uncontrolled way, without any limitations. It becomes the Universe with no beginning and no end. It contains more and more information, deceives with its accessibility for everybody and often with the apparent honesty and openness of Internet users. Nevertheless, the

Internet includes numerous traps for researchers who have to constantly develop not only their methodological competencies but also digital and communicative ones, as well as their skills of perceptibility, intuition, criticism and many others in order to be able to conduct qualitative studies on high quality Internet. What is important is that the researcher should not be discouraged by the difficulties encountered on the Internet. Also failures should not result in giving up research. The global network is increasingly becoming a space of our lives and everyday functioning of not only youth but also adults and elderly people. We use it for the purposes of our work, education, to search for information, communicate, interact with others and have contact with popular culture. Hence, on the Internet we can observe many phenomena and processes reflecting objective reality, which however occur in different ways and determine other variables. Therefore, it is important to conduct Internet research systematically, intensify it and use virtual ethnography as one of the research methods.

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